

AUGUST 3, 1978

LIGHTER-THAN-AIR-TRAVEL

ANNCR:

DESPITE THE SCIENTIFIC STRIDES MADE IN MANY DIRECTIONS THE GOAL OF SPANNING THE OCEANS BY FREE BALLOON STILL ELUDES MANKIND, AS THE RECENT FAILURE BY TWO BRITISH BALLOONISTS SHOWED. VOA'S LARRY LESUEUR LOOKS BACK IN HISTORY AT LIGHTER-THAN-AIR FLIGHT.

VOICE:

MAN HAS FLOWN SAFELY TO THE MOON AND BACK. YET JOURNEYING FROM ONE CONTINENT TO ANOTHER BY FREE BALLOON REMAINS ONLY A DREAM, HOWEVER, THE ALLURE OF SILENTLY DRIFTING ACROSS THE SKIES UNDER A BALLOON IS NOT HARD TO GRASP, AS THE FRENCH SCIENCE FICTION NOVELIST, JULES VERNE, SUGGESTED SO ENGAGINGLY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY.

IT SEEMS EFFORTLESS AND IT CERTAINLY LOOKS BEAUTIFUL. BUT, OF COURSE, IT'S EASIER SAID THAN DONE. INDEED, THERE HAVE BEEN NO LESS THAN NINETEEN ATTEMPTS TO SPAN THE ATLANTIC BY FREE BALLOON AND SIX MEN HAVE PERISHED.

YET, AN OUTSTANDING FACT ABOUT THESE UNSUCCESSFUL EFFORTS IS THAT IN A WORLD OF INCREASING GOVERNMENT INVOLVEMENT MOST OF THE BALLOON ENTHUSIASTS HAVE BEEN PRIVATE SPORTSMEN -- FREE SPIRITS WITH PERSONAL GOALS.

(OPT) NOBODY ASKED THEM TO TRY TO FLOAT OVER THE HIGH SEAS. AND IF THEY COME DOWN IN WATER THEY CAN ONLY HOPE THAT A PASSING SHIP WILL RESCUE THEM. (END OPT)

OF COURSE, IF ATTEMPTS TO SPAN THE OCEANS BY FREE BALLOON WERE GOVERNMENT SPONSORED, THAT MIGHT WELL MAKE A DIFFERENCE

WHEN A GOVERNMENT TAKES SUCH A DECISION IT USUALLY SPARES NEITHER TIME NOR MONEY TO MAKE SURE THAT THOSE INVOLVED ARE MORE STRINGENTLY TRAINED AND BETTER OUTFITTED THAN MOST PRIVATE ENTHUSIASTS WOULD BE. INDEED, WITH GOVERNMENT SPONSORSHIP, THE ATLANTIC HAS BEEN SPANNED MANY TIMES IN THE PAST BY LIGHTER-THAN-AIR MACHINES. THE MASSIVE AIRSHIPS KNOWN AS ZEPPELINS AND DIRIGIBLES CROSSED THE NORTH AND SOUTH ATLANTIC MANY TIMES WITH HUNDREDS OF PASSENGERS AND CARGO ABROAD. AND THE ENERGY CONSUMPTION OF THEIR MOTORS WAS NEGLIGIBLE COMPARED TO A MODERN JET AIRCRAFT.

GERMANY'S FAMOUS "GRAF ZEPPELIN" FERRIED PASSENGERS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC FOR NINE YEARS WITHOUT A MISHAP. STILL, GOVERNMENTS NOW SEEM TO REGARD LIGHTER-THAN AIRSHIPS AS IMPRACTICAL, AND POSSIBLY DANGEROUS.

AMERICA'S FIRST RIGID AIRSHIP, THE 680-FOOT "SHENANDOAH",, BROKE APART IN A STORM FIFTY YEARS AGO AND KILLED FOURTEEN OF HER CREW. BRITAIN, FRANCE AND ITALY ALSO LOST DIRIGIBLE AND CREW MEMBERS IN CRASHES CAUSED BY STRUCTURAL FAILURES. THE "ITALIA" SUCCESSFULLY CROSSED THE NORTH POLE IN 1926 BUT CRASHED DURING ITS SECOND ARCTIC EXPLORATION TWO YEARS LATER. FINALLY, IN 1937, CAME THE FIERY DEATH OF THE MIGHTY "HINDENBURG", KILLING THIRTY-SIX PERSONS WHILE COMPLETING ITS THIRTY-SEVENTH TRANSATLANTIC VOYAGE.

SO EXCEPT FOR WEATHER BALLOONS AND THE SO-CALLED "BLIMPS" OCCASIONALLY USED IN THE UNITED STATES FOR ADVERTISING PURPOSES, NEITHER GOVERNMENTS NOR MULTINATIONAL BUSINESSES HAVE LOOKED KINDLY ON LIGHTER-THAN-AIRSHIPS FOR TRANSPORTATION PURPOSES RECENTLY. THEY SEEM TO REGARD THE ALMOST AWE-INSPIRING AIRSHIPS AND MAJESTIC BALLOONS AS JUST TOO HAZARDOUS AND PREFER TO RELEGATE THEM TO THE WORLD OF THE SPIRITED AMATEUR.
FF/RD/WJL